

**Notes from Interview with
Ann Hodge Macomber
October 10, 1993
by Susan E. Woods**

Ann Hodge Macomber started her medical library career at Louisiana State University in New Orleans in 1949. She left LSU to attend library school at Emory University and received her master's degree in 1951. She returned to LSU and worked as reference librarian until 1955. She went to Emory University to work with Miriam Libby and worked as reference librarian there until 1960. She returned to LSU as acquisitions librarian and later became Associate Director. She retired from LSU in 1987. She served as Secretary/Treasurer of the Southern Group in 1955. After the split between Southern Group and South Central Group, she maintained close ties with Southern Chapter.

Question: What can you tell us about the founding of the Chapter?

The founding of the chapter was in 1951 and I was at Emory in library school so I was not at that initial meeting. My first meeting was forty years ago in January of 1953 in Birmingham. I was asked to be a speaker on the program, which was really a thrill for me because I was so young and new at being a professional. Mr. Postell, Sr. and I rode the train from New Orleans to Birmingham (back then, we had little travel money). I remember so well I had one of my typical living-in-New Orleans sinus attacks and went to my ENT man and asked him to help me because I had to speak at this meeting and asked him to pull me together. I asked him for some jokes to use in my presentation and he gave me some. They were clean so I could use them. That was my first time to speak at a meeting and I was not prepared. I talked about reference and public relations as it relates to reference. I almost gave an off-the-cuff speech. I felt so strongly that reference is how you present what you know and what you don't know you just say I don't know but I'll find out for you. I remember that first meeting as if it were yesterday. I even remember the dress and hat I wore.

So I was not directly involved with the first meeting, which was really an organizational meeting which Mary Louise Marshall at Tulane and Bill Postell at LSU pulled together. I was a reference librarian at Tulane in New Orleans. I left LSU and went to Emory from 1955-1960 and worked for Mildred Jordan. Then I returned to LSU under John Ische and worked there until I retired [in 1987].

Question: What about the big split in the organization?

Originally there were twelve or thirteen states in the group, even New Mexico was included. That was because Mildred Blake, librarian at New Mexico, had been at Tulane Medical Library and was closely associated with the Southern Group. Even with that many states, there was not a large attendance at the meetings. It was the 1970's before we had over 100

people at a group meeting. The split in the organization had been suggested in the 1960s. I happened to be Chair of the Group at that time and we were meeting in Austin, Texas. Texas librarian, because they were such a large group, didn't like having to travel so far to the deep South. They didn't want the Group to be so all-inclusive and wanted to narrow the state limit, but were not successful.

We knew it was coming again in the 1970's at the South Carolina meeting so I came fully prepared with statistics ready for this talk. I had done my homework because Lee Jones, librarian from Texas, and I had conversations in the past and I knew I had a formidable foe in Lee who was ready to make the split. The meeting was held in a classroom at the University. I spoke and got emotional because I felt so strongly about the division of the Group that I had to sit down. I said that Texas could have its own group and still have a representative come to the Southern Group. But we lost and I have felt lost ever since. I had to leave and become a member of the South Central chapter because with the development of Talon and other National of Library programs, you almost forced to belong to the group where you were assigned to work. But I think even if we had made the decision to stay with the Southern Group, we would later have been required to go with South Central. Southern Chapter is the only one not to have its birthplace as part of the chapter now.

Irene Graham has said that Southern Chapter is the only one not to have its birthplace as part of the chapter now. She felt we ought to put a plaque on the door of Tulane Medical Library and LSU Medical Library stating that they were the founding libraries of the Southern Group.

I agree with her but Louisiana was caught, as a border state and it was not in my hands because I was not the Director. It was John Ische and Mayo Drake at the new medical library in Shreveport who made the decision. I remember we included North Carolina, South Carolina, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Florida, Louisiana, Texas, Arkansas, Oklahoma and New Mexico. Many states have now left and become members of other chapters. The beautiful part about the Southern Group, remember, that because our meetings were small, you knew everyone there. The opportunity to meet with people and to know them on a one-on-one basis was invaluable. You don't ever get that now in your Chapter meetings because you're having 200 in attendance. I personally feel you lose a lot.

Question: What role has Southern Chapter played in your professional life and how have you seen that role evolve?

The whole medical library profession since I became a MLA member back in the 1950's has tripled or quadrupled. Your national meetings then were not so large and Southern Chapter has been so well represented. I've forgotten how many Presidents we had but that made you feel proud we knew them. These were not people you just voted for on a mail-in ballot. They were people you rubbed elbows with and share thoughts with. The design of groups then was to allow staff to attend, not directors. You could talk to the ILL librarian from Texas and [solve problems]. Remember there was no magic then like fax and xerox. We had to photocopy with a wet process. When I was at Emory, I had to take my turn in the

darkroom like everyone else. If you ever tried to photocopy something from some of the large oversized German periodicals and make a clear copy in a darkroom you know what I'm talking about. Group meetings allowed an opportunity to exchange complaints, talk about problems, and have a one-on-one relationship. I got the most value from these. I wouldn't give anything for the old days. I know when you talk to older people, we all say the same thing: the good old days. Don't misunderstand me, I believe in progress and it's wonderful to have mechanical devices to transmit information, but in my day chips meant wood, and hardware meant hammers and nails. We were dealing in a much more simplistic way with the exchange of information. The group helped me to function better as a medical librarian.

Question: Why did Southern Chapter have so many presidents?

We were so grand. At any national meeting in a large room you could always find the Southern Chapter Group. We were the ones laughing. And of course, there's Southern hospitality.

Question: What about the dress codes you mentioned?

I am presenting a picture of the 1956 meeting at Emory at the reception tonight. You will note in the picture that then all the ladies wore gloves and some wore hats. Now you never see a hat at a meeting and I now have a drawer full of little, white gloves. All the banquets were always formal affairs. The host library always invited to the banquet the faculty and their wives because we wanted to make a showcase and let the faculty see medical librarians as a group. It was all part of public relations and selling services to those putting together the budget. It was always so enjoyable at the banquets to have these faculty and their wives interspersed with the librarians at the banquet. That added a lot to our meetings. You couldn't do it now because it's too large. In those days we had no more than forty, fifty or sixty people at the meetings. I miss the formality of the meetings and within the library scene itself. Perhaps an enforced dress code is a little bit stringent but you never saw men in shirt sleeves and no women in blue jeans at our meetings.

Question: Can you describe the MLA meeting in 1970 in New Orleans?

In 1970 we hosted the national MLA meeting and we worked very hard on it. In those days the host library did a lot of work. We wanted to make it as Southern as possible. The welcome part was held at the Roosevelt Hotel and we turned the stage in the large ballroom into a garden scene. We begged, borrowed or stole old antebellum costumes and rented things for the men and that's how we were dressed to greet the guests. I was responsible for [the decorations] and had gotten a promise from the city park commissioners to lend us trees. I even rode in a pick up truck with some maintenance men from LSU and got trees and plants for decoration. We had \$200.00 for flowers and went and begged to florist to help us. It was a jazz banquet. We also decorated umbrellas and I held on to one of those umbrella till three years ago when I finally had to give it up. It was really a scene that most people say they still remember. Everything we did back then we did with money in mind. We were

very money conscious. We went to a five and dime store and picked up the artificial flowers that had fallen on the floor and the manager let us have them at cost. That was the last year the MLA convention made money for the organization. We made \$10,000 for MLA. They were making money on each ticket they sold and we fed that money back into the organization. It was our pleasure to do it and I still think that today, if we had more volunteers giving time and effort, the cost wouldn't be so prohibitive.

Question: What people contributed to your professional development?

Certainly my Director, William Postell, Sr., is one. He encouraged me to go to library school and to get my master's and Mary Louise Marshall, Director at Tulane, who was a grand lady of MLA. My first MLA meeting was in Washington, D.C. and Mary Louise Marshall took me in hand and took me up to some of the other great ladies outside of our region. She introduced me to Gertrude Annon and to Estelle Brodman. She made sure I met the leading women as a new member and I felt I'd really arrived. That was so meaningful to me when I could shake hands with some of those women. (Back in those days, there were more women than men, so I remember the women more than the men.)

What advice would you give to new medical librarians?

When they go to meetings they should try to establish a social rapport with their colleagues. I think structured chapter and national meetings are terribly important but don't devote all your time to sitting in a meeting and taking notes. Get out and have social intercourse with your colleagues and peers. Share thoughts about what's going on in your libraries. That's how you grow. One-on-one is important. My complaint about the meetings now is the loss of that free time. I served six years on the Program Committee of national MLA and I fought very hard for rules to allow a free time. But now it's very hard with CE and business meetings and committee on committee on committee. It's very difficult to have this free time and it's a loss.

Some of the best conversations I had were [during social gatherings]. Elizabeth Runge from the University of Texas Medical Center in Galveston had a wonderful collection. She singlehandedly built that collection . . . When she retired from Galveston, Lee Jones became head and interlibrary loan became slow and poor. Sadie Hill from August and I were in a lounge at the hotel with Lee Jones and I told him, "Your ILL service has gone down and I wish you could improve it." Lots of directors don't know this about their services. I did this twice. After I talked with the directors, several months later I checked and the ILL service had improved. You could say this in a social setting. I've reminded Lee of this later. In a social setting, your defenses are down.

Do you have any final comments?

I feel very honored that Southern Chapter remembers me and was kind enough to include me in this meeting. It's very special to be able to come back on what I consider to be my 40th

anniversary because it was in January, 1953 that I was here in Birmingham, my birthplace, for my first southern meeting.

Notes from Reception, October 10, 1993, Southern Chapter Meeting, Birmingham

Reception attendees: Mary King, Jack Smith, Al Brandon, Mark and Judith Hodges, Nancy Clemmons, Carol Burns, Susie Burrows, Ted Srygley, Sarah and Fred Brown, Ann Macomber, Ann Robichaux, Lucretia McClure, Janet Coggan, Susan Woods

Sarah Brown and Ann Macomber were conversing and reminiscing about the 1956 photograph. They mentioned the confederate flag on the nametags in this photograph. The south central is really a Texas organization. About the rift: John Ishay and Mayo went with the flow in 1972.

S. Brown: We used to have everybody....that we liked.

A. Macomber: Look at all the presidents from Southern Chapter that we've had. Helen Holt Garrison at Houston. Dick Lyder is really sweet to her now.

S. Burrows: In the by-laws of 1976, the purpose of the group was social...it was actually in the bylaws!

A. Macomber: The camaraderie of Southern Chapter was unsurpassed.

A. Macomber: I feel like I raised Fred (Roper, incoming president of MLA).

A. Macomber: January 1953 at that second meeting we had, in Birmingham - Mary Louise Marshall and Mr. Postell were at the first meeting in New Orleans. We met in your library (to Sarah, meaning Lister Hill) and went to The Club.

Mark Hodges showed some photographs of his new library building and talked of his collection, and of the Brodman and Darling awards.

A. Macomber: The office in Chicago has changed a lot.

M. Hodges: Carla Funk took over at that office.

S. Brown: Nancy Clemmons is going to get a new library soon.

S. Brown: (To Al Brandon) Do you still work for Majors?

A. Brandon: It's been fourteen years now.

Ann Macomber related the story of the Majors boys and Mildred Jordan's whistle on her garter. She then told a story of visiting Mildred Jordan in the hospital with a bouquet of yellow mums. Mildred was on oxygen and still smoking, which Ann thought was dangerous,

but Mildred assured her if a valve was closed, it wasn't dangerous.

Sarah Brown told of going to visit Miriam and Fred Libby (Miriam was the Director of the Emory Library). Fred had a quarter interest in a purple car. He was a railroad man - engines, I think - and was interested in banana republics. He was a great gastronome.

Mark Hodges: At the 1970 New Orleans Conference Judith and I drove back with Miriam and Fred. They were traveling with their dog, Lady Blue.

S. Brown: Miriam used to squirt her camellias before a party so they'd bloom.

Fred Spence (Sarah's husband): Before World War II when Sarah was a girl, Birmingham was the home of Tennessee Coal and Iron (TCI), a subsidiary of U.S. Steel. They employed, through the lend-lease program, 32,000 people and were the biggest employer in the state. Today, through reorganization and attrition, U.S. Steel has reduced their workforce to less than 2,000. This has happened over 50 years. Then Sarah came to the rescue. She joined the medical center library in 1948. It was just getting started after the war. They started off at zero. Today that operation employs 18,000 people. This saved Birmingham from becoming a ghost town. That medical center saved this town.